

Death by Suburb Sermon Series
Sermon #1: A Suburban Spirituality
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Leigh and I spent the first four years of our marriage living in apartments. It wasn't a terrible existence, and the places we lived in Indianapolis and Columbus, Ind., were decent and had a minimum amount of roaches (ladybug story). But from the moment we got married, we both had a dream: to own our own house.

And here we are, with our 3-bedroom, 2 ½-bath house on a corner lot in Hainesville. We have joined a growing class of people here in America. I'm not sure the exact moment I realized we were members. Maybe it was when we bought our first minivan. Or when I wrote the first mortgage check. Or the first time our daughter came home from a birthday party with a goody bag that cost more than the present she took. Yes, we had become – duh duh DUH! – suburbanites.

In the sermon series that starts today, we're going to take a look at what it means to be a Christian in suburbia. We'll look at some of the unique challenges we face, and we'll talk about some things we can do to keep our faith alive and our soul intact in this suburban culture.

I read a few books on spirituality this summer that speak directly to this issue, and from which I will be drawing a lot of material. One is called "Plastic Jesus," by Eric Sandras, another is "The Jesus of Suburbia" by Mike Erre, and the final and most intriguing one is called "Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing Your Soul." The author, David Goetz, is a Christian writer and, interestingly, a resident of Wheaton, another Chicago suburb. So what he said really hit home for me, and I hope it will for you.

My family and I moved up to this area in 2001, after I graduated from seminary in Indianapolis. Once we settled into our house, met our neighbors, and found the nearest grocery, a strange, warm feeling came over me. It was a feeling of accomplishment. We had made it. We had escaped the hand-to-mouth existence of cheap apartments and part-time jobs; we had graduated to the suburbs. And that felt...well, here's what writer Eric Bogosian said, "If you say the word 'city', people have no problem thinking of the city as rife with problematic, screwed-up people, but if you say suburbs, there's a sense of normalcy." I finally felt...normal. House. Car. Brown picket fence. Basketball goal in the driveway. A Walgreen's on the corner. Comfort. Security. Convenience. We had joined the normalcy of suburbia.

But the longer we've lived here, and the more I've gotten to know the people around me, the more I question if they are really normal. What I mean by that is that I question whether or not normal should be our goal. Was Jesus normal? Was his goal comfort, security, and convenience? That's what I hope to explore with you in this series.

So let's start with this question: Is it an oxymoron to talk about suburban Christianity? My first reaction would be that it is not. In fact, it is in the suburbs where churches seem to be flourishing. While urban churches struggle to stay alive and meet the needs of those around them, the suburbs have spawned the likes of Willow Creek and Saddleback Community Church, home of pastor Rick Warren, who wrote "The Purpose Driven Life." Far from fading away, the churches in the suburbs seem to be exploding.

We are one of four churches within a one-mile stretch of Riverwoods Road, two of which have recently expanded their buildings.

So on the surface, faith seems to be alive and well in Lincolnshire and other suburbs across America. But going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car, so deeper questions need to be asked: What's happening within the walls of those churches? What kind of gospel is being preached? What kind of Jesus is being introduced? What kinds of Christians are being formed?

One of the common threads in the books I read was that churches tend to reflect the communities of which they are a part. What we see and experience outside the walls seeps into and influences the life and ministry of the church. If this is true, what characteristics do suburban churches possess?

I think the title of Eric Sandras' book, "Plastic Jesus," says a lot. Sandras, who's a suburbanite himself, laments the fact that he is "living in a spiritual suburbia with nice sidewalks and picket fences around my Christianity." He says Christianity is supposed to be an adventure, but we expend a lot of energy keeping our Christian doctrines all clean and form-fitting, our appearances buffed up, and our lives organized around practices, meetings, and the occasional church function. That doesn't sound like much of an adventure.

But do we really want adventure in our faith? To the contrary, our lives contain a lot of evidence that what we want most is comfort and security. Our existence and our culture revolve around risk management. We have dual side airbags, security systems, and home insurance, life insurance, car insurance, flood insurance, fire insurance, earthquake insurance, and faulty insurance insurance.

And from God, we want Hell insurance. David Goetz says we have a contractual arrangement with God: I do good works, God blesses me. We go to church, we give money, and we do all the right things – in the hope that God will never put us in a position where we actually have to trust him. We pray and plan and organize in an attempt to protect ourselves from life to the point that when life doesn't go as we plan and tragedy strikes, we wonder where God went wrong.

This has always been the temptation of the people of God – to tame him. He increases mystery; we desire to remove it. We try to bring Christ down to our level again, but this time not to bring the kingdom of God, but to enhance the comfort of suburbia. Sandras says we treat God like the cosmic pizza man. We call out to him, but only open the door only halfway and limit just how close he can get to us in order not to feel uncomfortable. We sometimes think his only job is to deliver to us what we are asking (in 30 minutes or less).

Goetz says that the goal of suburbanites is not to live a Christ-like existence; it is to maintain a certain quality of life. And we expect God to help us do that. Yet, as Mike Erre notes, we lose the ability to be useful in God's hands when we become afraid to lose the success we have achieved. Author Marva Dawn says it more pointedly: "The Good News is no longer life-changing. It is life-enhancing. Jesus doesn't change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore; he changes them into nice people." Nice people. Ouch.

I think this question of what kind of Christians we are formed to be is at the heart of suburban existence. Because I believe, deep down within our soul, we know something is wrong. Is it a surprise that the most accurate TV portrayal of the suburbs is called "Desperate Housewives?" We know there is something more. Jesus says, "I have come

so they would know life, and have it to the full.” Is this it? Does a full life mean a full schedule, a full credit card, and a full medicine cabinet?

We are good at living lives full of appointments and activities, but that only produces breadth. Isn’t one of the most used suburban phrases “spreading myself too thin”? We have breadth, but we lack depth. We are so spread out that we end up with a shallow spirituality, with no means or guidance on how to go, not farther or faster, but deeper.

Goetz calls this the “thick life.” He says, “Our lives seem flat, because the harsh light of the suburbs tricks us. We need to learn to see life through different eyes. The outward world of suburbia is only one dimension. There’s another dimension, a deeper dimension. Our first step is to look for it, to acknowledge that much of this life we live is an illusion. Deep down, something isn’t right.”

What I hope we can do together in the next few months is explore some different things we can do together to go deeper. Much of what we experience in suburbia throws up roadblocks to doing that. The cacophony of noise discourages silence, the selfish focus works against generosity, and the subtle but incessant competitive spirit leaves no room for humility.

So we have two choices. One choice is to escape, to flee, to throw off the shackles of suburbia and live in a tent eating plants and washing our clothes in a creek. Escape? How can we escape a mortgage, a lawn that needs mowing, and a full calendar of school plays and parent-teacher conferences?

The other option is to realize that Jesus is here, in suburbia. But he doesn’t look like we think he should look, or even how we want him to look. He’s not comfortable, he’s not safe, and a life lived in Christ is not convenient. We have become convinced that there are more important things to pursue than a deep, meaningful relationship with God. But the power of Jesus lies in offering us a better way, of moving us from desperation to transformation. Christ offers us a full life, a deep life, a life lived in him, if we are willing to move beyond just being nice. We don’t need to escape the suburbs; we need to find Jesus there.